

## Religious feminism and feminist spirituality

*Call for contributions for the colloquium on the 28th of November 2017 and for NQF 38/1  
Coordination: Irene Becci, Helene Fueger, Catherine Fussinger et Amel Mahfoud*

Denounced as fundamentally oppressive systems for women, monotheistic religions have been the subject of strong criticism from feminist movements in the West. The traditions most targeted by these criticisms were first those from which most Western feminists had come from, namely Christianity and Judaism (especially in North America). As for the theme of Islam and feminism, it is a particularly complex question today because the issue of the place of women within Islam was very quickly instrumentalized in the colonial context. If the three monotheistic traditions have been criticized for promoting social organization and discriminatory values against women in civil society, their internal functioning has also been called into question (difficulty or even impossibility for women to occupy positions of authority within religious institutions, but also to access texts and places of worship, as well as certain rites).

From these criticisms - but in a much broader context of putting religion into question – the following idea imposed itself: real advances in feminism required renouncing all forms of religious or spiritual beliefs and practices, which were considered to be necessarily alienating. From this point of view, women's struggle could not be advanced without a strong retreat, even a disappearance, of all religions. For many, Western feminism appears to have had secularization as both a condition of possibility and as a result. In other words, Western feminism is connected to the loss of social influence of religion within modern institutions and a significant decrease in religious affiliation and practice.

The relationships between feminism, spirituality and religion, however, deserve to be considered from another perspective today for two reasons.

First, while in the West modernity seemed for a time to imply the disappearance of religion, sociologists and politicians are reconsidering this vision since the end of the 20th century and thematize the "reconfigurations" and / or the "return" of religions within Western societies. Their analyzes are not, however, univocal. Some insist on the radical manifestations of such a return into public space, in the form of fundamentalist movements, particularly within Christianity and Islam. Other research underlines the individualization of the relationship with religion, or highlights the emergence of "new religious movements", of New Age spiritualities, or other spiritual practices – which interest many more women than men - of various exotic inspirations. Within the academic field, therefore, approaches to religion and spirituality attempt to take account of the complexity of what the term "religion" and "secular" encompass at a sociological level. It is in this context that the historian and gender studies specialist Joan Scott (2009) recently considered it necessary to question the relationship between secularization and emancipation of women, which, according to her, has no historical linearity. The second reason which justifies approaching the relationship between religions, spiritualities and feminisms from a different perspective lies in the existence, often little known in Francophone circles, of the structuring of a feminist critique "from the inside" carried out by women who hold to both their feminist posture and their religious or spiritual commitment. Such a phenomenon was first observed in Christianity and Judaism in the 1960s and 1970s, then a clear feminist dimension emerged in various new religious movements (Wicca, the cult of the great goddess, etc.), and later certain Muslim feminisms emerged and became diffused.

The targets of these religious feminisms are diverse and their demands may take the path of cautious reformism or that of a radical confrontation (an appreciation that must always be contextualized according to the religious framework, some being more constraining than others). Thus, at the level of "work" within religious institutions, some have demanded a better recognition of the functions and activities predominantly occupied by women. Others, from the outset, have demanded access for women to central positions in the exercise of their religion, positions to which they were or are still excluded from (more recently the question also arose for homosexual persons). Regarding texts and considerations of the very conception

of the divine and the sacred, the spectrum is equally broad. It may include highlighting the women that had been made invisible in sacred books and in the tradition, of extracting the fundamental texts from their patriarchal and homophobic interpretations, but also of promoting a feminine conception of the divine and of the divine word (for example, "the Goddess" of certain Christian feminists). According to their strategies and interests, these feminists with a religious commitment have therefore proposed alternative practices and rituals, but they have also created associations or academic journals. Through their actions, these feminists have sometimes invested themselves in the most liberal sections of existing institutions, sometimes they have worked at their margins, or they have broken with their official structure while still claiming a particular tradition. The desire to ally with others also led them to become involved in ecumenism or interfaith projects. Others yet have developed a commitment to new forms of spirituality, which are felt to be less fixed and better able to reconcile with their feminism.

Living with their century, these feminists with a religious or spiritual commitment have also had to position themselves in relation to feminist issues regarding civil society (divorce, abortion, sexuality, homosexuality, etc.) and often have had to distance themselves from the official positions of their religious authorities. In the present context, these feminists' views on the positions and strategies of the fundamentalist wings of their tradition are of great interest.

Finally, when we examine their feminist commitment, we must consider the nature of the arguments underlying their criticisms and claims. Given the importance within the various religious traditions of a system based on a highly hierarchic "complementarity" between men and women, we can wonder how these feminists relate to differentialist conceptions, which assume an essential difference between the masculine and the feminine, accompanied by a strong reevaluation of the later. Is this the mainstream or have other feminist postures also been favored in some cases?

**By launching a call for scientific contributions devoted to "religious feminisms and feminist spiritualities," NQF wishes to receive proposals analyzing the forms and stakes of a feminist commitment within the three monotheistic traditions (Judaism, Christianity, Islam) as well as within new religious movements.**

Considering the public of NQF, it is necessary that these contributions contextualize the stakes specific to the religious / spiritual tradition while analyzing the feminist stakes, not only as they are developed internally but also with regard to the positions feminists developed outside religious or spiritual frameworks. In this respect, it seems important to us to put into perspective the geographical diversity of these feminisms which have religious / spiritual roots. Indeed, the relations between feminism and Protestantism or between feminism and Judaism do not, for example, function in the same ways in Europe and the United States, a fact which undoubtedly owes as much to the different forms taken by feminist mobilizations as to the diversity of religious orientations in these two socio-geographical areas (in the USA, for example, conservative Protestant churches are more numerous and liberal Judaism is much more present than in Europe). There is also a particular geography of new feminist religious movements (for example, the political orientations or inspirations of certain neo-pagan movements, sometimes reactionary, sometimes progressive, may be opposed in the USA compared to Europe or in cities compared to the countryside). This also signifies that there is a circulation and acclimatization of religious feminisms and feminist spiritualities, as exemplified by the case of Muslim feminisms. In this context, analysis that adopt a comparative perspective either between geographical areas or between religious traditions seem likely to provide stimulating insights.

NQF organizes a colloquium on the theme "Religious feminisms and feminist spiritualities", which will take place at the University of Lausanne on the 28<sup>th</sup> of November 2017 and will continue with the publication, at the beginning of 2019, of issue 38/1 of NQF devoted to this same topic. The present call therefore applies to both the colloquium and the issue 38/1 of NQF. We strongly encourage communications with an article proposal, however it is also possible to propose only a communication or an article.

The languages of the colloquium are French and English. The articles in issue 38/1 of NQF will be published in French. However, it is possible to carry out the evaluation and correction of the articles for texts written in English, German or even Italian. In this case, however, the translation and funding for the translation must be done by the author of the article.

**Please send your proposals for communication and / or article (1-2 pages) by e-mail to Amel Mahfoudh (amel.mahfoudh@hevs.ch) as a word document by 3 April 2017. The evaluation of the proposals will take place in April and a response will be given in early May 2017.**

The acceptance of a proposed communication and / or article does not mean that the article will be accepted in the end. Indeed, each text is entrusted for evaluation to two reviewers. On this basis, it may be "accepted as is," "accepted on condition of modifications" or "rejected".